

national case study - Flanders

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The state structure and its consequences

Since the state reform of 1988, Flanders has the full autonomy over the field of education. Only three areas still remain federal (national): the duration of compulsory education, the minimal conditions for granting diplomas, and pension plans. As such, they form a relatively stable framework. One major change occurred in 1983: education was made compulsory up till the age of 18.

The Flemish policy on education cannot be understood without taking into account the former Belgian structures and policies. Belgian politics were dominated by three cleavages: socio-economic, linguistic, and religious. The linguistic and the religious division also prevailed in higher educational policy making. Problems could only be solved when the balances in each of these cleavages were retained (consociational democracy). As these cleavages pulled together to form a division between Flanders and Wallonia, the demand for the establishment of a federal state became stronger.

The first step towards self-regulation in educational matters for Flanders and Wallonia was taken in 1969, when two Belgian ministries of education (one for the Dutch speaking educational system and one for the French speaking) were established. The constitutional reform of 1970 (the third in Belgian history) established three Communities and three Regions. In 1980 those Communities formally became responsible for education, but with so many exceptions that *de facto* no real policy could be developed. After all, it resulted in a complex and indistinct regulation. As a result, the regulation on higher education didn't see any major developments from the law of 1971 onwards, except for saving plans imposed by the national government. The last legislative action was taken in 1977, when college education was partially reformed. The national policy on education in general was politicized, lacked continuity, and was strongly centralised.

From the moment that Flanders could develop its own educational policy, this policy was aimed at avoiding these dysfunctions of the Belgian system. To do differently and better was the strongly emphasised priority. In the educational field, as in other policy

areas, this was translated into the principles of autonomy, deregulation and responsibility. These three principles were also applied to higher education.

Governmental view on the economic role of higher education

The Flemish government itself speaks of a "new policy philosophy: a philosophy rested on a totally new relationship between government and the educational field, whereby the government sets out the beacons of the policy, provides the means for the realisation of this policy (envelope-financing) and grants the widest possible freedom to the educational field for this realisation." (Vlaamse Raad, Stuk 546 (1993-1994) Nr. 1).

The higher educational system in Flanders is a threefold system. Since 1970 three types of higher education are distinguished: university education, higher education of the long type (*HOLT*), and higher education of the short type (*HOKT*). From 1988 onwards, the Flemish government has tried to specify the particular role of each of these three types, although it acknowledges that the distinction is not always (and can not always be) clear. One of the reasons for this indistinctness, is the 'vocational drift' of the universities and the 'academic drift' of the colleges (*HOLT* and *HOKT*). In this way, their relation becomes competitive both in terms of recruitment and in attracting private funds. The Universities Decree of 1991 and the Colleges Decree of 1994 define the task and identity of the respective institutions. Universities are characterised by the interaction between education and research, colleges (*hogescholen*) by the interaction between education and labour market. More precisely, universities must provide academic education, scientific research, and scientific services. Colleges on the other hand must guarantee college education, thematic scientific research, and services to society.

These definitions already show that the Flemish government recently has put more emphasis on the unity of the higher education system. Regulations concerning the three types of higher education are being attuned. This means that the legislation on *hogescholen* is fitted in with the legislation on universities.

The Flemish government strongly feels the need of securing the quality of higher education in an international context. It is important for education institutions to be able to adapt dynamically to changing demands and European initiatives. "Quality education is more than just a transfer of knowledge. It also implies preparing young people for the society of tomorrow, including the labour market." (Van Den Bossche, L. (1995) Beleidsbrief: School maken in Vlaanderen). Therefore, autonomous higher education institutions are required. This is in line with the above-mentioned policy philosophy and principles. As far as colleges are concerned, this autonomy must be

complemented with a scaling-up. Otherwise they will not be able to cope with the high quality demands regarding the technological knowledge, social skills, and flexibility of their graduates. This increase in scale (from 163 to 29 colleges) has been enforced by a revision of the subsidising system, which favours larger units.

Autonomy finds its counterpart in accountability. The price that higher education institutions have to pay for being able to develop a personnel and financial policy and so on, is the system of a fixed budget granted by the government (envelope-financing). Because the Flemish government aims at "affordable quality", institutions must make adequate use of the (limited) financial resources provided by the government, and must try to attract private funds. They can do the latter by capitalizing their 'third role' of providing services. Recent decrees guarantee the safeguarding of their interests, compensation of their costs, and a just share of the proceeds. But although cooperation between higher education institutions and between these institutions and industry is encouraged, overall the proportion of government financing remains very large (more than 90 %). The Flemish government strongly believes in the necessity of guaranteeing the normal functioning of higher education institutions and in the supplementary nature of private funds.

All this has resulted in a new, contemporary, dynamic and professional management. As a consequence, the quality of higher education should also improve. A new quality assessment system has been introduced, based on self-assessment, peer review and site visit. The system is to a large extent the same for universities and colleges. The governmental control concerns only the product (control in retrospect). Another guarantee for quality is the legal prohibition of an uncontrolled expansion. The range of subjects offered by each university is established by decree, as are eleven fields of study and the basic courses within each field for colleges.

In short, the Flemish government acknowledges the importance of adaptation of higher education institutions to demands from the economy, especially the labour market. But in line with its fundamental decision for autonomy, it does not impose the way in which this adaptation must be achieved. The government creates that framework of rules that gives higher education institutions the greatest possibility of responding to economic and societal demands.

Main policy issues

The Flemish government is facing a paradoxical situation. Although long-term unemployment remains high (especially for low-educated persons), certain jobs with particular skill requirements cannot be filled up. Labour policy is a federal competence. But the Flemish government can take measures in the field of education and training.

Therefore, it has taken away the barriers that existed for establishing lifelong learning and learning-working structures.

It has also done this with regard to the internationalisation of education.

But it also states that, when responding to economic demands, both universities and colleges must keep in mind their respective roles and identity, i.e. the academic orientation of universities and the more professional orientation of colleges.

The nature of policy objectives

Clearly, the objective of the autonomy-directed policies is to change the behaviour of the higher education institutions. Although education never is too expensive, the budget for education is nevertheless limited and must be kept under control. Through fixed budget financing of higher education institutions, the Flemish government tries to invoke a more professional management. In turn, this should make possible a more adequate use of funds, and therefore should improve the quality of education.

Successive decrees have coherently changed the whole system of higher education. Together with the University Decree, the state universities were given legal personality. The college structure was reformed within the same philosophy and therefore was shaped with the universities as an example.

The reforms are so radical, that all regulation concerned has to be re-examined. It makes no sense to re-apply all of the existing laws and decrees. This would only lead to even more complexity. Therefore the decrees aim at integrating as much of the preceding legislation as possible, thereby striving for uniformity.

Policy instruments

The Flemish government uses the flow of government financing as the most important policy instrument to influence or steer higher education. Because legislation cannot be directly applied to the private institutions, it often imposes measures by making subsidies depend on voluntary changes by the institutions.

For a large part, the absence of strict regulation is an important 'instrument' as well. In the area of organisation several measures were taken: establishment of the Flemish Education Council (*VLOR*), granting of legal personality to state universities, legally imposing governance structures (with a formal representation of external stakeholders).

The policy network

When in 1988 Flanders becomes fully responsible for its own education system, very soon a political agreement is reached between the four major parties in the Flemish Parliament (*CVP, SP, PVV, VU*). This agreement takes up an idea that has for longer been lingering in Flanders, but could not be executed in the existing structures, i.e. establishing an Autonomous Council for Community Education (*ARGO*). The double role of the Minister of Education, namely being responsible for state education as well as for the whole educational system, is thereby abolished.

This shows that the main decisions are taken between political parties. This is an obvious fact for the then minister of Education, D. Coens: "Of course the trade unions were not involved in this, only the four political parties which represent the largest part of the Flemish population." (*Vlaamse Raad, Stuk 161 (1988-1989) Nr. 4*). Several commission members agree that the right procedure was followed: political parties take up their responsibility.

The political parties operate in the Flemish Parliament. Whereas in the seventies and eighties competences were granted to the executive power through general laws, now this tendency is turned the other way round. All initiatives taken by the executive, must be approved by Parliament.

Only after an agreement has been reached, the Flemish Socio-Economic Council (*SERV*) and the *VLOR* can advise on it. But their role, and that of other actors must not be underestimated. They are consulted thoroughly before decisions are taken. For university education the Flemish Interuniversity Council (*VLIR*) is of particular importance. In the field of college education the Flemish Colleges Council (*VLHORA*) has recently been established. Furthermore there are the representatives of (the umbrella organisations of) organizing bodies (*inrichtende machten: ARGO, VSKO, CVPO, OVSG*) and the trade unions (*COV, COC, ACOD, VSOA*).

Appendix 1: Experiences with the protocol

The protocol has been helpful to define the focal points and the interpretation that has to be given to the different aspects of national policies. It presents a clear view on what is required for the report.

Appendix 2: Work still to be done

Primary sources used in the document analysis (period: 1988-1998): inaugural declarations, statements, explanatory memoranda, hearings, advices, decrees, questions and answers, reports of parliamentary commissions. Some secondary sources were used as well.

Still to be done:

- further analysis of above-mentioned documents (period 1978-1988);
- analysis of government budgets to complete the document analysis;
- interviews with: members of staff of the minister of education who prepared the decrees, senior civil servants, chairmen of *VLIR*, *VLOR* and *VLHORA*, chairmen of school networks, chairmen of parliamentary commissions, the special commissioner for the reorganisation of the universities, economic policy makers (*VBO*, *VEV*, trade unions, *BB*).